

Tacitus on A.D. 64

Myles Lavan

Tacitus' *Annals* are a fundamental 'nail in Nero's coffin', condemning him as one of the worst rulers ever known. Here Myles Lavan takes another look at book XV to try to make sense of its litany of bad behaviour. Myles' emphasis is not on what the emperor did or did not do but on how a historian writes history.

Tacitus' narrative of the eleventh year of Nero's reign, A.D. 64, offers an extraordinary concentrated display of megalomaniac excess. Here in the space of a few pages we find an extravagant orgy on a lake, the emperor singing (not 'fiddling') while Rome burns and Christians set on fire to illuminate the night. This is no accident, nor is it merely a reflection of historical events. This narrative, the centrepiece of the fifteenth book of Tacitus' *Annals*, has been meticulously crafted to play an important role within the work as a whole.

The *Annals*, Tacitus' last and greatest work, is a history of the reigns of Augustus' descendants Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, and Nero. Tiberius receives six books (I–VI) and Gaius and Claudius together get another six (VII–XII). The rest of the work is devoted to Nero, the last of the Julio-Claudians, but the transmitted text breaks off in the middle of Book XVI in A.D. 66, with two years left before Nero's death in A.D. 68.

Scholars have long debated whether the original work ended in Book XVI or continued to a Book XVIII (the latter would make for six Neronian books and a nice symmetry for the work as a whole, but would have required Tacitus to spin the events of two and half years into two and a half books). Either way, Book XV occupied an important position in Tacitus' Neronian narrative, whether it was the second-last book or the end of the first half. The book culminates with the great Pisonian Conspiracy of A.D. 65, a botched attempt to assassinate the emperor which resulted in the decimation of the Roman aristocracy. It is in order to raise the stakes for this abortive attempt to free Rome that Tacitus pulls out all the stops in his narrative of the preceding year.

A tyrant worthy of tyrannicide

Nero's first transgression loses something in translation. Tacitus tells us that 64 A.D. was the year in which the emperor first

performed as a *kitharode* (singing to the accompaniment of a *kithara* or lyre) in a public theatre. This was a long-time passion of his – one of his first actions as emperor had been to retain the services of the best *kitharode* of the day as a teacher and he had already performed in private – but giving a public performance was a big step. In an age when actors can become Governor of California (the Terminator himself) or even President of the United States (Ronald Reagan), it requires a leap of the imagination to grasp the depth of the contempt in which musicians, actors, dancers, and other performers were held by traditionalist aristocrats like Tacitus. Many artists were slaves; many were foreigners. Even those who were free and had Roman citizenship were treated as second-class citizens under Roman law because of what was seen as their 'dishonourable' profession.

Nero's sexual escapades have lost less of their power to shock. Tacitus goes on to describe in lurid detail an extraordinary banquet put on by Nero's sinister right-hand man, the Praetorian Prefect Ofonius Tigellinus. The party was held in a lake, on a floating raft pulled by *exoleti*. Originally the past participle of the verb *exolesco* (meaning 'outgrown' or 'past his prime'), *exoletus* became a technical term for a man past adolescence who was used for sex, distinguishing him from younger 'boys' (*pueri*). 'A vile person of mature age', as one of my older dictionaries puts it, missing the point that any vileness lay in the slave system that subjected both men and women, adults and children to sexual exploitation – certainly not in its victims. In this case, the emperor's evidently extensive corps of *exoleti* were deployed on rowing boats and arranged by age and their particular sexual expertise. Meanwhile, the shores of the lake were lined with brothels filled with aristocratic women and nude prostitutes, all dancing provocatively. Nero, Tacitus tells us, left no depravity untried that night – or so you

would have thought, if he had not descended to a new low a few days later by marrying one of his *exoleti*. The verb that Tacitus uses (*denubere*) is gender-specific and normally used only of women. (The *de-* prefix probably referred to the fact that a bride was marrying out of her household and into her husband's.) Just in case you didn't get the hint that Nero was assuming the role of the bride, Tacitus goes on to tell us that he wore a veil and brought a dowry. There was even a marriage bed; 'everything' was done in public – even those things that are normally hidden by the night (no prizes for guessing what he means).

'Disaster followed', Tacitus writes, inviting us to see not just a temporal connection but a causal link between Nero's depravity and one of Rome's greatest catastrophes. For A.D. 64 was also the year of the Great Fire. A quarter of the city burned to the ground; another half was reduced to scorched ruins. Although Tacitus is careful to appear to suspend judgement, he draws the reader's attention to rumours and circumstantial evidence that the emperor was implicated in starting, or at least feeding the blaze. Allegedly Nero wanted the glory of re-founding Rome and giving it his name. (Suetonius tells us that he planned to rename the city 'Neropolis'.) The destruction also gave him the opportunity to build a massive new palace, the famous 'Golden House', which took a big bite out of the city east of the Forum. It included a large lake, in the place where the Flavians later built the Colosseum, and extensive parklands – all within the bounds of the old city.

As suspicions grew that the emperor had a hand in the city's devastation, Tacitus tells us, Nero looked for a scapegoat. He found one in a universally despised cult commonly known as the *Chrestiani*. (Tacitus smugly shows that he knows better, noting that the founder of the cult was called Christus, with an *i* not an *e*.) Professed Christians were rounded up and Nero decided to make their execution entertaining. Now there was nothing new in public executions – the killing of criminals was a common sideshow at gladiatorial games – but Nero had something more creative in mind. Hosting the show in his own gardens, he had some of the Christians dressed up in the skins of wild beasts and torn apart by dogs. Others

were crucified and then, when night fell, set on fire to provide human torches. Tacitus is disgusted. Not because he sees the Christians as innocent victims – he agrees that the adherents of this ‘vicious cult’ (*exitiabilis superstitio*) deserve the most extreme punishment – but because the real point of this spectacle was not to protect the state but to satisfy Nero’s sense of cruelty (*saevitia*), the characteristic vice of tyrants.

A sense of impending doom and gloom

All this in the space of a few pages. And, as if the account was not grim enough in itself, Tacitus intensifies the sense of crisis by sprinkling the narrative with reminders of great disasters in Rome’s past. The groundwork has already been laid in the first third of Book XV, which covers the previous two years and focuses on skirmishing between Rome and its rival Parthia on the eastern frontiers of the empire. Only two years before the Great Fire, Caesennius Paetus – the arrogant but none-too-competent governor of Cappadocia – had managed to get himself and two legions besieged by a Parthian army. The Romans despaired, surrendered and, it was said, were ‘sent beneath the yoke’ (an old Italian tradition by which a defeated enemy was made to bow down and pass under a spear set as a cross-bar between two other spears standing upright). It was a humiliating setback for the Roman empire. Tacitus deepens the shame by comparing it to a much earlier disgrace, the Caudine Forks. That was the name of the narrow pass in which a Roman army was trapped by the Samnites in 321 B.C. There too the Romans surrendered and were sent beneath the yoke. The name means little in English today, but the French still talk about passing under the Caudine Forks the way we talk about ‘meeting one’s Waterloo’. The Romans remembered it all too well. Tacitus activates that memory both by having Paetus’ soldiers compare their situation to the Caudine Forks and by echoing the language of the canonical account in Livy’s earlier history.

The Great Fire is used to recall another disaster, this time the sack of Rome by Gauls in 390 B.C. Tacitus tells us that some people pointed out that the fire had broken out on exactly the same date (19 July) as that on which the Gauls had burned the city 453 years earlier. Tacitus himself brings up the Gallic fire again a few lines later. Nero suggests another comparison. As the city burns, he puts on a private performance as a *kitharode*, singing of the fall of Troy – the disaster that marked the beginning of Roman history. (Remember that the Romans regarded themselves as descendants of the Trojans.) Finally, as Tacitus is bringing the year to a close, he

mentions a short-lived revolt by some gladiators outside the capital city. Everyone, he says, was talking about Spartacus. The mention of the great slave rebel of the first century B.C. is a bit incongruous here. But it is yet another indication that contemporaries felt that they were living in a time of crisis – or so Tacitus would have us believe – and that Rome was under threat.

A disappointing climax

The explanation, and literary justification, for all this doom and gloom lies in the last third of the book, which covers the year A.D. 65. The whole year’s narrative is devoted to the Pisonian conspiracy, making it the single longest episode in the whole of the *Annals*. Leading Romans plot to kill Nero and replace him with the illustrious senator Gaius Calpurnius Piso. The conspiracy is a pathetic failure. The conspirators repeatedly procrastinate and, when they finally do settle on a plan and a date, they are betrayed because one of them is a bit too theatrical in his preparations (his ostentatious dagger-sharpening and extravagant goodbyes rouse a slave’s suspicions). Once the emperor starts rounding up suspects, the conspirators race to implicate each other. It is a sordid affair, and only a freedwoman and a soldier come off with any honour. Many prominent Romans are put to death, among them the poet Lucan (not before he informs on his own mother!) and the philosopher Seneca (innocent of any involvement, apparently).

Tacitus’ narrative brings out the story’s dramatic potential, as the reader feels first sympathy with the plan to kill Nero, then frustration at the conspirators’ bumbling failures and finally disgust at the aftermath. But the conspiracy’s dramatic narrative, not to mention the sense of disappointment, is all the more intense precisely because Tacitus has raised the stakes over the course of Book XV by showing just how vicious Nero’s reign has become. What hope for the Roman people when it cannot free itself from this ‘mother- and wife-murderer, charioteer, actor, and arsonist’ – as the one honourable soldier calls him to his face? (The odd catalogue of crimes is a nice reminder of how seriously traditionalists took Nero’s passion for the stage.) Vindication must come. And it will come, in the form of the aptly named Gaius Julius *Vindex* (‘Avenger’/‘Liberator’), but it is four years and (probably) three books away – and modern readers are denied it by the truncated state of the text.

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doesn’t disappoint!